

Nostalgia

by Randall Keenan

I am one of those annually lamented, oddball Americans who find the official holiday season a time of depression. In truth, I am not so much depressed during the holidays as I am melancholy, beset by feelings of nostalgia and longing. I find that as the season becomes more and more a commercial festival, full of ad campaigns and nightly news of how much we Americans are spending, what's hot and what's not, and an array of more and more inane Christmas movies and television specials where the old tunes jingle their bells and take the sleigh to grandmother's — the more I wish to retreat from it all, and wonder if indeed we Americans will ever step back from the hype and the hoopla and find in simplicity some solace and reflection.

I say that nostalgia plays a large part in my holiday melancholy, for I remember so vividly those ten or eleven years when the holiday season held a profound bewitchment for me. In my earliest years out in rural North Carolina, I remember being roused early on Thanksgiving morning to help my uncle break corn. This was the old fashion way of getting in a corn crop: the dried stalks skinny in the fields, their dry golden ears hard and ready for grinding. In all honesty, as a boy, I deeply resented the tromping around the cold earth, stooping and shucking through the husk. Yet I remember how good the anticipation of that fabled turkey would be, and how my belly would glow with the mere thought of it. And, after the work was done, the house would be a-throng — indeed the entire village — with that sense of the holiday upon us, relatives from far and wide would have descended upon the town, and there was a profound sense of fellowship that went on well into the night, with folk going from house to house, catching up, making merry, enjoying sweet potato pie and pound cake and left over ham.

Likewise, Christmas held a true sense of a festival. I remember my great-great-aunt continued an old custom — dying out even them — of greeting every person you see on Christmas morning with “Christmas gift!” trying to beat them to the phrase: the first one to say it got the gift. Again there was the talk and the food and church and the relatives from here and yon, and the general feeling of a special time being upon us, and the folk were not responding to the news from CNN or their radio or from discount sales at the local mega-store, but from custom and a need for commemorating not only the time but ourselves.

To be sure, nostalgia in and of itself is a hollow thing. We all have childhoods, and look back upon them with a particular sharp feeling in our guts. Time can be cruel and plays cruel tricks on the memory, making often the good better and the bad vanish altogether. (I was no innocent: there was plenty of television to watch in those days, the Macy's Day parade on Thanksgiving, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* around Christmas, and it's become a cliché to talk about the menfolk gathering in front of football games; I desired the flashiest, bestest, goodest, wonderfulest toy available, and solidly expected it to be under that tree; and some of my relatives I dreaded to spend five minutes with, let alone a week or two.)

Which is not to say that my nostalgia is disingenuous or vain or merely silly; my longing springs from many wells, some from merely missing those dead and gone,

some from wanting to be a boy again, some from a sense of powerlessness to head off the rush of the holiday season losing all semblance of what it once had been and was meant to be.

One of my mentors chastised me once, with good reason, saying that to lament without dedication of resolve was a selfish, self-pitying, sentimental act. Therefore, I will resolve — in small ways and perhaps large ways — to find actions to make the holiday season active and human for me again. Not so much to recapture any old-time feeling, but to find ways of making the new-times rich and meaningful, whole and holy.



Photo courtesy of NYCtourist.com

Thanksgiving

By Fred Chappell

We were lucky and unlucky. From the poverty of the Great Depression of the 1930s, we blossomed into a solid middle-class family by the middle of the 1950s. But it didn't feel like the middle class; it felt as if we had become wealthy beyond all the dreams of boundless greed because our only standard of comparison was our former state and that of our neighbors.

When I was very young, and until I was fourteen or so, Thanksgiving was an important holiday and a thrilling one. It was the end of harvest and sometimes we would have pulled the last of the corn from the stalks on the eve before, reserving Thanksgiving morn for rabbit hunting or the easy but necessary household tasks.

Now began the time of mending: clothes torn or worn through by the labors of summer, boots brought from the shed that had held them since April, a harness that had weakened or broken, implements like buckets and basins; axes, hatchets, hoes and knives were brought out for sharpening.

The women set us younguns to tasks we enjoyed: seeding and "stringing" pumpkins so they could be peeled for pies and "mashes," stripping peels from baked sweet potatoes, peeling the skins of apples into long unbroken spirals.

Our Thanksgiving feast (sometimes actually so termed) was mostly vegetables: potatoes of two sorts, squash of three kinds, and four or five kinds of pie. Stewed chicken, sausage patties, country ham, and sometimes fried rabbit were the meats. There was no turkey; we didn't raise turkeys.

The most fervent part of our Thanksgiving prayer was for the soldier boys to come home safe soon soon soon.



Photo courtesy of NC Dept. of Archives and History

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But by 1956 the Turkey had arrived. My parents no longer lived on the farm, though it stayed in the family. But my father had built a motel and we lived in the central house unit—two storeys and a persistent doorbell—and now we were prosperous enough to buy a dressed turkey from the butcher.

The stove was electric, not wood-fired. Only sweet potatoes were baked, and we ate frozen Brussels sprouts and—oh well—pie made from canned pumpkin. There was little for anyone to do, except for the cooks—and there were too many of them to fit into the tiny kitchen.

So we all sat around the TV set, staring glumly at football games in which we had no interest. We rarely spoke. Then we went to the table with little anticipation and no real hunger. Once there, however, we talked at last, with great animation and good cheer, until an overfed lassitude claimed us and we crept back to the TV set, there to doze in front of another pointless football game.

I believe that at this point we all hated Thanksgiving, knew that we did, but felt that to say so would show ingratitude. Hadn't we ached to have economic security, full bellies, and a cozy holiday? Hadn't we received exactly what we wished for?

Yes.

We should have imagined something better, that's all.

Fred Chappell was born in Canton, in the mountains of North Carolina. He took graduate and undergraduate degrees at Duke University and for many years has taught at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Author of a dozen books of verse, two volumes of stories, one of criticism, and seven novels, he has been awarded the Sir Walter Raleigh Prize, the Best Foreign Book Prize from the Academie Francaise, the North Carolina Medal in Literature, and an Award in Literature from the National Academy of Arts and Letters. For his poetry he has been awarded the Bollingen Prize and the Aiken Taylor Prize. His work has been translated into many languages, including Finnish, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, and Farsi. He and his wife Susan live in Greensboro.

Richard Chess is an associate professor of Literature and Language at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He directs the Center for Jewish Studies at UNCA. He also directs UNCA's Creative Writing Program. He has published a book of poetry, *Tekiah* (Univ. of Georgia, 1994) as well as individual poems in many journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Triquarterly*, *The New England Review*, and others. His work has appeared in two recently published anthologies: *Telling and Remembering: Modern and Contemporary American-Jewish Poetry* (Beacon 1997), and *The Sacred Place* (Univ. of Utah, 1996). He lives with his wife, two stepdaughters and son in Asheville, North Carolina.

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Randall Kenan is currently a Visiting Professor of Writing at the University of Memphis in Tennessee. He has also been Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University and a lecturer at Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College. He is the author of five books, including *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* and *Other Stories* (1992), and *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, to be published next year. He is the recipient of numerous awards for his writing, including the Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, the Whiting Writers Award, and the Sherwood Anderson Award.

MariJo Moore, of Eastern Cherokee, Irish and Dutch descent, attended Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee, and Lancashire Polytechnic in Preston, England, where she received the equivalent of a BA in Literature. She is the author of *Returning to the Homeland—Cherokee Poetry and Short Stories*, *Crow Quotes*, *Tree Quotes*, *Stars are Birds and Other Writings* and *Spirit Voices of Bones*. She was honored with the prestigious award of North Carolina's Distinguished Woman of the Year in the Arts in 1998. Presently she is editing an anthology of North Carolina Indian writings titled *Feeding the Ancient Fires for the North Carolina Humanities Council*. She resides in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

"VISIONS OF FAITH: PHOTOGRAPHS BY WENDY EWALD AND CHILDREN"

Visions of Faith, on view at the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill from March 7 through June 6, 1999 will feature 75 black and white photographs made by children ages eight to 13 with photographer Wendy Ewald. The exhibition documents the children's experience living in minority faith communities in a time of great cultural change. The photographs include images of prayer, home ritual, and community gatherings in Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish and Catholic families. The exhibition is intended to foster interfaith dialogue and understanding, and an awareness of our commonalities and differences. The project was conducted under the guidance of Wendy Ewald, a MacArthur Fellow and research associate at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, and curated by Ewald and the Ackland's Ray Williams. The exhibition will be available for circulation beginning in the fall of 1999.

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Tree drawing courtesy of Darrin Bark, a 21-year old artist of Eastern Cherokee descent who resides in Cherokee, NC. His creations have appeared in *Indian Artist*, *Shifting Winds*, *Asheville-Citizen Times*, *News From Indian Country*, *Tree Quotes* and *Rattlesnake Singing*. His work will also be featured in MariJo Moore's forthcoming book of short stories, *Red Woman with Backward Eyes*.

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WHOLENESS AND HOLINESS

THANKSGIVING

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NOSTALGIA

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SENSE OF THE SACRED

Rkia Cornell



REGENERATIVE RITUALS

Yash Garg



HERE AM I

Rick Chess



CEREMONY

MariJo Moore



Sense of the Sacred

By Rkia Cornell

I grew up in a Sufi environment. My ancestors belong to Sufi orders and to a certain extent contributed to their growth and institutions. Sufism is Islamic mysticism. It is that dimension of the Islamic faith that puts more emphasis on the inner rather than the outer, the eternal rather than the temporal and the esoteric rather than the exoteric side of religion.

In Morocco where I was born, raised and lived until the age of 22, my parents instilled in me this sense of the sacred. I received my world through the lenses of the *Qur'an* (Koran). The *Qur'an* states: "Nor sell the covenant of Allah for a miserable price. For with Allah is a reward far better for you, if you only knew. What is yours must vanish; What is Allah's will endure. We will certainly bestow on those who patiently persevere their reward according to the best of their actions."

I try to live my life in accordance with the *Sunnah*, the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, in the hopes of emulating his example. My dress, my food, my dwelling places, my surroundings, my body, my words, my actions, and my inner thoughts all are governed by my belief. Every morning, when I open my eyes to see the light of a new day, I recite the following formula: "Praise be to God who has granted us life from being nothing and verily to Him we shall return." I thank my Creator for blessing me with the gift of life.

For most Muslims this supplication is the first acknowledgment of their gratitude towards God. The rejuvenation of this statement, *ash-shahada*, is the bearing witness that there is no god but God. It is followed by the five daily prayers which keep the Muslim in constant remembrance of The Merciful, The Giver, The Compassionate, The Forgiver, The Charitable, and all the Attributes of the Divine, in the hope that we may experience what it is to be charitable, loving, and compassionate towards others. These prayers are a celebration of one's awareness of the sacred.

Friday is a day off from work and from school, a day for couscous, the very well known Moroccan dish, a day to feed the needy, a day to attend the Mosque and wear the best of clothes, a day in its entirety dedicated to thinking about God, being good to others, sharing, and meditating. Time stops and starts again, old sins are wiped off and new rewards are granted. Friday is a day of celebration of a rejuvenated faithful person.

Then comes Ramadan, an entire month of abstaining from food, drink and conjugal union from sunrise to sunset, a month where every mosque is filled with worshippers day and night. During this month, people share their food with their friends, families, neighbors, and even strangers. The social barriers break, the rich eat food cooked by the poor, and the poor savor the dishes offered by the rich. During this month, nobody goes to bed hungry, a real celebration of Divine Bounty.

I loved this month when I was little girl in Morocco, and I still love it now. It is a month where people try to control their anger and shortcomings, try to learn how to discipline their desires and weaknesses. Qur'anic recitation fills the air in markets, from the tapedecks of taxicabs and public buses, in houses, public broadcasting, television, at schools, and of course at the King's Palace, everywhere the Qur'an is truly celebrated. It is in this month that the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad 1400 years ago. As a child I remember my mother telling me that during this month the sky opens and all the prayers were answered, and that all the *Jinns* are shackled and the Angels patrol the universe. The Feast day that marks the end of Ramadan (*Eid al-Fitr*) is a day for celebration.

Just few months later, Muslims who can afford it start preparing for their *Hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Excitement is everywhere and celebration parties are held to wish the pilgrims a happy farewell. At the end of this event there is a big celebration throughout the entire Islamic world. This is the feast-day called (*Eid al-Adha*) in commemoration of the sacrifice of the Prophet Abraham of his son Isma'il. Pilgrims in the holy land and Muslims all over the world join in celebration of this day.

The life of a Muslim is a manifestation of the following prophetic dictum: Worship God in this world as if you are going to die tomorrow, and deal with the material world as if you are going to live in it for ever. The Islamic holidays symbolize this constant acknowledgment and renewal of the covenant between God and humanity.



Sufi Ceremony in the Triangle area.
Photo courtesy of Steve Exum.

Regenerative Rituals

By Yash Garg

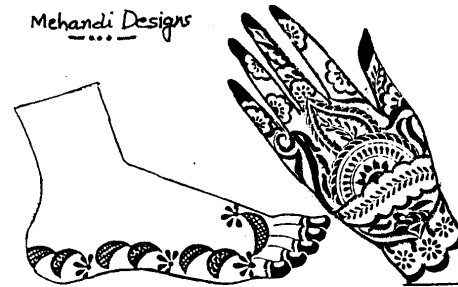
Holidays are galore in India, and most of them are gala events. There are many religious faiths in India, including Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, and Judaism, and each has its own religious holidays. My faith is Hinduism, and here I discuss how the meaning of the holidays has changed for me over the years.

Growing up in India, I looked forward to holidays because we got new clothes and new bangles, and we feasted on sumptuous foods and desserts. The approach of the holidays prompted us to spruce up and decorate the doorsteps of our home with creative designs called *rangoli* and gave us the chance to show our newly acquired clothes and toys and *mehandi* (henna) designs on our hands to our visiting relatives and friends.

There were special holidays that I especially enjoyed. To celebrate *Vasant Panchmi*, which means the advent of spring, and which falls in January or February, we wore yellow clothes. Both Hindus and Muslims follow the lunar calendar in regard to the dates of holidays so their religious holidays fall on different dates according to our western calendar each year. To celebrate *Holi*, which falls in February or March, we were allowed to squirt clothes of our friends and neighbors with colored water and dab their faces with red powder. In July or August, we tied colored silken thread around the wrists of our brothers and received gifts from them to celebrate *Raksha Bandhan*, which means a “promise to protect.”

Karva Chauth falls in September or October. To celebrate, we fasted the whole day and then partook of special food after seeing the moon. We lit our home with clay lamps and candles and set off firecrackers in the yard to mark *Diwali*, which means “row of lights,” and falls in October or November. We celebrated *Janamashtami* (Krishna’s birthday) in August and *Ramnavmi* (Rama’s birthday) in March or April by going to the Temple to watch the midnight ceremonies.

At that time, I liked the holidays just because they were fun. As I have grown older and made America my home, I have come to appreciate the Hindu holidays not only for their lovely and exciting rituals, but also for their cultural meaning. As a North Carolinian, I am still able to celebrate the Hindu holidays, but with a new perspective, equally respecting the observances of holidays by followers of other religions. While holidays like *Vasant Panchmi* and *Holi* bring out the community spirit and cultural unity of people of Indian origin, holidays like *Raksha Bandhan* and *Karva Chauth* strengthen sibling affection and spousal love, respectively. During *Diwali*, I examine my life to see whether I have followed my dharma or duty during the year, and make new resolutions for the coming year. *Janamashtami* reminds me of the lesson on karma yoga—the discipline of selfless action—taught by Krishna to Arjuna, the archetypal man. *Ramnavmi* gives me the best example of a “maryadapurshotam,” a person of impeccable integrity.



Celebration of the holidays keeps me connected to my cultural roots, gives me an opportunity for emotional and spiritual renewal, and makes me face life with an inner resolve to follow my dharma or the path of duty.

During Festival days, fairs are held and elephant rides are arranged.
Photo and drawing courtesy of Yash Garg.

Here Am I

By Rick Chess

Photo courtesy of Rick Chess.



During dinner a few days after *Rosh Hashanah*, my youngest stepdaughter, in the spirit of the Days of Awe, apologized to us for treating us badly over the past year.

She spoke to each of us individually, identifying the bad behavior, asking to be forgiven for it, then vowing to work hard not to repeat the same mistakes this year. As I listened to her, I was reminded where we were in the Jewish year.

Not that it was easy to forget. Bottles of unopened seltzer, left over from a *Rosh Hashanah* gathering of friends at our home, lined the kitchen counter I faced from my seat at our weekday table. During our homemade *Rosh Hashanah* ceremony, I led the group of 50 adults and kids in an imaginary *tashlikh* service. Everyone's eyes closed, we reflected on our lives over the past year—physical, emotional, mental, spiritual—and thought about our regrets in each of those areas: not exercising enough, not spending enough time with family, not studying Jewish texts or meditating or praying... Then, enacting a ritual similar to that enacted by Jews throughout the world at that hour of the day—late afternoon, first day of *Rosh Hashanah*—we emptied our pockets or the folds of our skirts, shaking the crumbs of these regrets, these transgressions into the imaginary river in which we stood. Carried off by the current, they left us unburdened, free to begin once more a new year rededicated to living better lives.

Afterward, some of my friends warmly thanked me for helping them connect deeply to the holiday. Awkwardly, I accepted their thanks. Who was I to lead anyone in a spiritual exercise, especially when I felt locked out of my own spiritual life, my inner life, standing outside the gate, desperate to be let in?

A few days later, my stepdaughter offered me a way in. Her sincere confession inspired first her older sister to do the same, then her brother, then her mother. This, I knew, was living Judaism. If I had been less distracted by my own life—after weeks of silence, I needed to write a new poem to release something, I didn't know what, trapped inside—I would have experienced, I think, then and there, holiness. But, when they turned, at last, to me, I could not accept the invitation to meet their eyes, to enter the temple that had been created at our table. Rather than honestly face my own failings—showing favoritism to my son, for one; emotionally distancing myself from my immediate family, for another—I turned to the dog, our beefy chocolate labrador, lying on the linoleum floor. At the sound of my voice, Leon rose to his haunches, anticipating, what, a slice of turkey? A biscuit? My tender hand? I had nothing to give.

Only in the last hour before leaving my office, a few days later, for *Yom Kippur*, did something move inside me. I felt the gate open a little, just enough for a few words to slip through to the screen or to the presence of whoever it is that hears when I call.

YOM KIPPUR 5759

MY GROANING SERVES AS MY BREAD.
MY RISING SERVES AS MY FALLING.

I HAVE FLOATED ALL YEAR. I HAVE
FEASTED AND RESTED WHILE THE WIND

FLUTTERED THE SLEEVES OF THE THIN
AND THE MOON LIFTED THE FACES

OF THE PALE WHO SOUNDED
THEIR HOLLOW O ABOVE MY DREAM.

NOW MY TREMBLING SERVES AS MY GROOMING:
I GROOM FOR AN AUDIENCE WITH YOU.

MY LISTENING SERVES AS MY CALLING,
MY REPLY TO YOU AS MY CONTRITION:

HERE AM I. HERE AM I.

MY TURNING SERVES AS MY AWAKENING,
MY TURNING OF PAGES, OF PAGES:

SURELY YOU WILL PASS BY, THE SHADOW
OF YOUR WRATH WILL GLIDE

OVER THE CURLED BOY
WITHOUT TROUBLING HIS WAKEFUL READING.

MY SEARCHING SERVES AS MY ROARING.
IT POURS FORTH AS WATER, IT CASCADES.

I BEND INSIDE MY REBELLING (MY WAY
OF KNOWING) AND STAND INSIDE MY
PLEADING:

LORD, GRANT ME THIS,
THIS COLD YEARNING, THIS BURNING VOW:

LET ME LIVE TO SERVE.

EVEN AS THE GREEN OUTSIDE IS SLOWING,
MY STANDING SERVES AS MY GOING.

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Ceremony

By MariJo Moore

When I think of celebrating holidays, inevitably I think of ceremony. In American Indian perspective, ceremony is a necessary act to obtain or regain balance with the earth. The purpose of ceremony is to integrate: to unite us with community, as well as to blend us with all of creation. To raise consciousness and shed the idea of individuality, of separation. Only in isolation can spiritual sickness exist, therefore to heal we must recognize a oneness with the universe.

Each ceremony has its own special purpose, varying from tribe to tribe and usually is culture-specific. For a millenium the Hopi of the Southwest have managed to grow corn in their semi-arid environment. Their annual ceremonies and respect for land are underniably linked. The Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok of northwestern California perform the Jump Dance, a ten-day ceremony to rid the earth of sickness.

In an effort to be objective, Western science would have us believe that the planet is dead, yet the world in which American Indians live is alive. Many scientists and other well-meaning professionals consider Indian tribal stories and traditions to be mere superstitions, placing them in the category of fairy tales. Perhaps the decision to consider Native peoples as mere primitives was made long ago in order to justify the taking of their lands. Regardless, there is much to be learned from these stories, especially those regarding the inseparable connection of the earth with its inhabitants.

The Cherokee story "How the Plants Gave Us Medicine" tells of a time when humans lived peacefully with the animals, were in total communication with them, and always asked the permission of the animal for its life before taking it. But when the people began to lose respect, began hunting for sport, needlessly killing animals, destroying the forests, and forgetting the importance of ceremony, the animals began to inflict diseases and infirmities upon the people. The plant world, in sympathy for the people, gave their medicines as cures for the diseases. Now, this plant world is being destroyed. And medical science, since the beginning of the 19th century, continues to turn its back on nature. The aspect of spiritual participation in one's healing is quickly pushed aside in favor of synthetic drugs and quick-fix therapies.

Koyaanisqatsi, the Hopi call this: "Life out of balance; life that calls for another way of living." Is life out of balance? How else can one explain that only about 20 percent of the world's original forests remain intact, and 99 percent of the frontier forests of the continental United States has been destroyed or ruined? What about the poisoning of waters, the widening hole in the ozone, the thousands of dollars being spent on the excavating of bones to be examined while the problems of modern-day people continue to be ignored?

What about our individual lives? What about the continuing racist hate crimes, the bitter stings of discrimination and stereotyping? The rising number of suicides every year (especially among youth), the ever-present damages caused by alcoholism and drug abuse, children being born addicted and with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and on and on? Have we lost this important contact with our inner selves? Have we lost our connecting responsibility to each other, to the land?

Today ceremony is often shunned in favor of organized society and electronic religion, in favor of short-cuts to spirituality, in favor of ignoring one's inner callings by listening to outer callings demanding more and more material gain. Ceremony is passed over in favor of defining instead of celebrating one's existence. In other words, we are being cut off from our inner selves, from the place where we can experience spiritual connection with all there is.

Many seek balance between the material world through the arts. For me, creating poetry is a way of seeking balance through ceremony, a way of going into the silence, gathering words, then bringing them to this realm to share with others.

I am not offering ceremony as a panacea for all the world's problems, but it can be a way to reconnect us with each other and with the land on which we depend. During this holiday season, it is my hope that we can lay aside differences in religion, in race, in beliefs, and consider how important it is that we all respect one another. Perhaps if we dwell on the similarities instead of the differences, we can set an example for the young ones who look to us for guidance.

TO CELEBRATE NOT EXPLAIN THE MYSTERY

AND I HEARD A VOICE

A SILVERY VOICE WRAPPED

IN SECRETS OF RED AND PURPLE

TELLING ME TO GO DEEP, DEEP INSIDE MYSELF

DEEP TO THE DEEPEST PART WHERE THE LIGHT LAY

IN THE CENTER OF THE DARKNESS

THAT IT WOULD BE HERE

I WOULD FIND THE CELEBRATION

OF WHO I AM, WHY I EXIST,

WHERE I COME FROM AND WHERE I AM GOING

AND IN THIS CELEBRATION I WOULD FIND

THE EXPLANATION THAT REQUIRES NO EXPLAINING

THE KNOWLEDGE THAT REQUIRES NO KNOWING

THE ANSWER THAT REQUIRES NO QUESTIONING

AND THEN I WOULD UNDERSTAND

AND THEN I WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND

AND THEN IT WOULD NOT MATTER.

From Spirit Voices of Bones ©1997